Stories in a New World

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Some short stories occurring after the "A New World" series. This time, a story about gods, and the world outside of Japan.

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Chapter 1

These stories are both follow ups to A New World, so I'm breaking them off into their own section . Both are somewhat introspective pieces, but a few nuggets of information should be about inside them as well. If I get a solid idea for another story in this 'timeline' I'll add it here as well.

The spider youkai ran through the trees.

She knew someone was there. Someone was hunting her. She could feel it's presence lurking in the darkness of the forest.

She changed her course, running deeper into the youkai infested woods. Perhaps the fear of some stronger predator would get the hunter off her tail.

Her hopes were dashed when the song began. A terrifying melody that youkai and human alike had come to fear. As the wordless tune echoed through her mind the shadows seemed to deepen, leaving only the light of the moon as a piercing lance of illumination to her blurred vision.

Lorleili

She stumbled on through the woods. She could escape if she made it to the canyon. The bird youkai couldn't chase her beneath the ground, and the residents of Chireiden wouldn't ask questions. She just had to get there.

Her hopes shattered as the melody changed to a triumphant tone. She barely dodged the blurred spear that flew from the air in front of her. She turned to run again, not caring about direction anymore, just trying to get away. To escape the deadly melody.

She realized her mistake when she hit the first tree. With the moon now behind her, she couldn't see anything. She tried to sidestep the barrier, only to run into another tree.

The light crunch of leaves told her that the hunter was close.

She desperately put her back to the tree and threw her web all over the area. "Why, why are you here?!" she screamed. "It was just an old drunk! An old rude drunk! What was I supposed to do when he blundered into my web? No one would miss him! Why? Who called you?"

The moon darkened as a figure stepped in front of this, then there was pain, terrible pain, as the next spear tore through her heart.

As her consciousness faded she heard her killer say, "The wind itself calls for justice."

Mystia looked up from her meal when she heard the girl approach. There was only one person who combined such innate grace and careless clumsiness. "Hello Kanon."

The kassha miko popped out of the bushes and bowed her head to the young bird youkai. "Heya Misuchi." Kanon looked over at the youkai Mystia had killed. "I see you got her first. I guess the guy's kids didn't need to call us miko up."

Mystia nodded. "So then he did have a family. I wondered if she was lying." Mystia delicately tore off a bit of leg, then looked back to Kanon. "You can have some if you want. I'm not that hungry. And spider doesn't taste that great."

"No thanks." Kanon sat down. "I'll just be carting off that corpse when you're done. Though you might want to hurry if you don't want to wind up sharing with my sisters."

"Hm? She must have annoyed someone important if they bothered calling up all of you." Mystia went back to her meal, focusing on the tastier organs and meats.

"No, we're just kinda bored. Lady Reiuji's wandering around on vacation, so we don't have much to do." Kanon stretched and started combing her hair. "Sanso was talking about raising every corpse in the cemetery for a musical number if something didn't pop up."

Mystia thought about what that might look like for a bit. "That might be fun to watch."

The two continued their various activities for a while. Kanon grooming, Mystia eating. Finally Mystia wiped her hand and turned to the kassha. "Hey, Kanon, um…"

Kanon's eyes flickered over. "Yeah?"

Mystia took a deep breath. "Uh, I heard you were around during the war. And, well, I was wondering… if you knew the first Mystia?"

Kanon's ears twitched at that. "The first Mystia…" Kanon's tails swished mournfully as she thought. "I was still young, even for a human, back then. I know she had an eel stand just like you." Kanon frowned as she tried to think back across the years. "I'm pretty sure she was a night sparrow though. That's why she had the blinding song."

"Sparrow?" Mystia felt mildly insulted. Sure sparrows were okay, but she was a shrike. A proud hunting bird, not a seed eater.

"I'm pretty sure about that." Kanon suddenly gave a catlike grin. "Why don't you ask Mokou. She'd know."

Mystia flushed. "That! I… er, don't want to bother her with that kinda-
"

Her response was stopped by a sudden impact that sent her into a rolling tumble across the clearing. When the world stopped spinning she found herself pinned under a much more feral looking kassha with fiery red hair. "Well, the criminal's already been apprehended, but I caught a birdie!"

Mystia fluttered her wings uselessly against the ground. "Very funny Hiso. Get off me."

"I don't think so. You ate all the good parts of the corpse so you'll have to pay up!" Hiso said cheerily.

"Augh, Kanon help me here!" Mystia pressed futilely against her captor.

"Sorry Misuchi. Gave you fair warning, so now the corpse is mine." Kanon whistled as she summoned up a wheelbarrow. Then cried out as another kassha entered the fray with a pounce.

"Not so fast sis! This corpse is mine." Sanso yelled as she landed on Kanon.

Mystia groaned the turned her attention back to Hiso. "So aren't you gonna go for the corpse too?"

"Nah, I'm fine with what I caught," Hiso said brightly.

There was another impact from the side, and when the whirling stopped Mystia was unsurprised to find Io there on top of both her and Hiso. "Heya sis. Were you gonna share?"

Mystia groaned and started trying to wriggle free again. Cats were such infuriating creatures!

"Another beer please miss."

"Sure thing," Mystia replied before grabbing a bottle out of her ice bucket and placing it down in front of the man. "Though you shouldn't stay up too much longer. The streets can be dangerous at night."

The man tapped his pistols and smiled. "Thanks for the warning miss, but I think I can take care of myself. Otherwise I wouldn't have come from the Shogunate" He took a long drink before continuing. "Still I should be heading back soon anyway. Don't wanna get locked out of the hotel."

"A good idea sir." Mystia placed a slip of paper down next to the empty plates. "I'll leave the bill here so you can go whenever you need to."

Mystia tossed a few more skewers onto the grill as the traveler finished his drink and left the tab. Normally she'd close up about now, but it was the night after a full moon.

She always showed up on the night after the full moon.

Sure enough the lamprey was done right when a slim figure landed next to her cart. Mokou winced at her landing, then slowly slid into the chair. "Heya. The usual."

Mystia let her eyes wander over Mokou's wounds as she dished out the rice. The immortal's eyes were surrounded by blood, like someone had gouged them out. Her shirt was burned all on the left side, and her pants were caked with blood around a spear sized hole. Mokou must have done well tonight, Mystia thought to herself. She expertly flipped the skewered lamprey onto a plate and placed it and the rice before the immortal. "Here you go."

"Thanks kid." Mokou dug into the meal like she hadn't eaten in weeks. Which might be true now that Mystia thought about it. She rapidly discarded that idea though. Keine would never let Mokou go that long without eating.

"Something on your mind?"

Mystia jumped at the question. "Ah no! Nothing important!" She turned to start washing the dishes, hoping the warmth in her cheeks wasn't obvious.

"Really?" Mokou raised an eyebrow at that.

"I was just thinking about something that happened earlier this week. For my other job." Mystia let her wings flutter a bit before bringing them back under control.

"Ah I see." Mokou's posture slumped just a little, and her gaze flickered to the statue down the street.

Mystia found her own gaze wander to the statue. It was hard to see in the dark, but she knew it by heart. After all it looked a lot like her. A statue to the first youkai to bear her name. The hunting youkai that helped save the village during the war.

"Hey Mokou. Can you tell me about my predecessor?"

The question seemed to burst from her. The second after she said that she cringed, knowing both how tactless and foolish it sounded. She looked at Mokou to see if she'd offended the immortal.

Instead Mokou was looking at her with an appraising air. Like a parent who is trying to decide what they'll tell a child about some serious matter. "That's a dangerous question to ask for a youkai. Are you sure you want to hear the answer?"

Mystia bristled at the accusation. "I'm not a child, Mokou! I can handle hearing a story."

"It's not that simple kid." Mokou waved her hand in annoyance. "You were born from her legend."

Mokou's voice grew distant as she repeated the tale Mystia had known from the moment of her birth. "'The youkai of vengeance, who

secretly hunted down those who betrayed the village. She lived among humans as a simple food stand worker, singing songs that made the children laugh. When the Lunarians came she led the youkai to save the village, fighting alongside Keine even to the point of death until rescue arrived. Then she passed away from her wounds before she could be saved.'"

Mokou looked back at her. "That story is the basis of your entire being, the truth of your existence. The history can never live up to that myth."

"So? You think I don't know that?" Mystia glared down at Mokou. "I know the story's got to be different from the truth. But that doesn't matter anymore. We youkai aren't slaves to people's imaginations anymore. We're born from legend but we are what we believe we are." Mystia pointed to the celestial dragon in the sky. "That was the victory of the youkai sage."

"You still don't get it." Mokou sighed much to Mystia's annoyance. "Think about what you said. You are what you believe you are. What if what I tell you changes all your beliefs. What if what I say leaves you wondering what to believe?" Mystia froze as Mokou's glare pierced through her. "I can't hurt you, but you can destroy yourself."

Mokou's gaze fell. "But… I think she would have wanted the person bearing her name to know her real story."

The immortal sighed. "So yeah. If you think you can handle having your world turned upside down, I'll tell you kid. But don't think it'll be everything in the stories."

Mystia hesitated. She wanted to know now, more then ever. But Mokou's words ran through her mind. The what ifs cascaded through her thoughts, each worse then the last. She had to take a deep breath to steady herself.

She looked up at Mokou. "Tell me this. She was still a hero right?"

Mokou looked towards the statue again. "She was."

"Then tell me."

Mokou turned back to her, then smiled sadly. "Very well, then."

"First you have to know her business was mostly a scam…"

The sun was rising when Mokou's tales finished. And Mystia had to admit the immortal had been right. The story had changed her. Changed what she was. Who she wanted to be.

But as Mystia sang to welcome the dawn she felt happier then ever. Perhaps her namesake hadn't loved the village like she did. Perhaps the little night sparrow had fought for her own sake instead of the lives of the villagers. Perhaps her heroism had come from a fear of losing, instead of a need to protect.

But no one could say that her predecessor hadn't stood for herself.

As the sun rose Mystia swore she would make this tale part of her. She would not be a creature of blind loyalty or servitude. She would follow her own path, even to her death.

Perhaps that path would be the path of justice that everyone thought she should follow. But it would be her choice. The one thing that was hers and hers alone.

Chapter 2

Disclaimer: Remilia is not a role model. And this is going to be bloody.

Remilia gazed up at the crimson moon from the balcony of her mansion. It had been some time… centuries in fact, since she'd last seen the moon in all it's splendor and madness. The crisp autumn air cooled her body with each breath. The wind shifted causing the leaves to rustle in the same familiar way. Yes, tonight was like that one imperishable night. A night of wonder, and excitement, anger, and above all else…

She shook her head sharply to clear the memories. There were some things she didn't want to remember. Not yet.

"Did a mosquito bite you, big sister?"

Remilia looked across the small table to where her younger sister was sitting. Flandre seemed utterly unconcerned with all the little details that were dragging Remilia into the past. Then again, Flandre's situation had changed a lot since those happy days. In Flandre's case, it was all for the better. Perhaps it was telling that as the world went to hell Flandre found a place in it.

She shook her head again. "It's nothing," she replied. "I merely find myself somewhat nostalgic now and then. I think it's a side effect of torpor." She grinned. "Some snacks should wake me up just fine."

Flandre's smile grew. "Ah right! Snacks! Juri should bring some by soon. And Flopsy should be making some as well."

"That moon rabbit?" Remilia raised an eyebrow. "Has she stopped shivering at the sight of blood?"

"I have no idea!" Flandre giggled. "I really wanna see what she makes!"

"Hmph," Remilia leaned back in her chair. "I hope she provides something of worth. Juri cooks to your tastes. Not mine."

Flandre giggled again. "Because she's my maid." Remilia did her best to ignore the sting those words caused. "Ah, but I did remind her that you liked rare stuff, so she'll probably make some special sweets for you."

"Good." Remilia looked away, out into the gardens. The colors of the leaves weren't visible in the moonlight, but the moon itself glowed pleasantly in the fountain, and several small plants glowed with their own light. After a few minutes tracing the patterns she decided Huian had planted them, probably at Marisa or Alice's request. While the young girl had Meiling's prejudice towards Chinese herbalism, she was more willing to bow to the magicians' requests. She tried to figure out what Feng Shui pattern Huian was creating with the plants, but she gave up after a while. She'd learned a lot from Meiling about martial arts forms, but her vampiric heritage kept her mastering chi where blood wasn't concerned.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the clatter of china. Remilia looked back towards the door to see Juri standing there, with Flopsy standing behind her. Apparently Flopsy hadn't mastered the art of walking silently with silverware. "Lady Flandre, Lady Remilia. The tea is ready."

Remilia raised an eyebrow as two tea kettles were placed on the table. "You let her make tea?"

Juri smiled as Flopsy shuffled nervously. "Just the tea itself. I added your normal mixers." Remilia nodded in understanding. Tea preparation was one of the hardest jobs in the kitchen. Adding the blood properly was a fine art. However before that stage, it was just normal tea.

Still, she grabbed the kettle Juri indicated as her own. She'd let Flandre test the rabbit girls cooking.

Her little sister, on the other hand, happily poured herself a cup from the rabbit's pot, and grabbed one cookie from each of the piles of sweets on the table. Remilia watched carefully as Flandre sipped the tea.

Remilia carefully concealed her smile as Flandre grimaced. "Ugh. This is bad." Flandre casually flung the cup off the balcony. Flopsy held the serving tray against herself as a shield as Flandre's smile twitched dangerously. "Juri, you need to teach Flopsy better. Otherwise she's good for nothing but stew." Remilia was about to comment on the cup when she realized there'd been no sound of it breaking. Juri had probably caught it with one of her dolls.

She decided to adopt an air of disdain. The little moon rabbit's terror was amusing, but she didn't want to break the girl. "I told you the moon rabbits were only one step above fairies. You shouldn't leave anything more important then cleaning to them." She carefully sipped her own tea.

As the flavors hit her tongue she was struck with another wave of nostalgia. The tea was so very close to perfect. She remembered the years spent refining this taste. How they'd tried method after method to get the flavor just the way she wanted it. Tweaking the timing, the leaves, the temperature, even the china it was served in and the spoon it was stirred with. Juri's tea was so close to the perfection they had created together. It was just a touch too salty. The way Flandre liked it.

Remilia set the cup aside and grabbed a third cup from the tray. "What are you doing big sis?" Flandre asked as she began to pour from Flopsy's pot.

Remilia ignored the gazes of the other three women. "I'm trying this tea to see what the fuss is about." When she was finished pouring she sniffed the liquid, then sipped.

It was bad, just like Flandre said. It would be passable for some destitute family on the streets, but a noblewoman expected more from her tea. She could taste only the faintest hint of her old recipe for red tea in it. It was possibly as far away from what Sakuya had once made as you could get while still having drinkable tea.

"Terrible," she commented. "You used boiling water instead of near boiling water, and you didn't clean the pot well enough. In addition you let it cool too much afterwards, and your whisk use is terrible." Flopsy seemed to shrink even more at the commentary. "Given how bad this is I'll leave Juri to test the baking." She grabbed a cookie and began nibbling on it, grimacing every time she sipped the tea. At least she was getting some pleasure off the stupefied looks on the faces of the others.

"Are you okay there sis?" Flandre waved her hand back and forth across Remilia's vision.

Remilia ignored her sister's antics. "Perfectly fine." She sat up a little more as a thought occurred to her. "Though I do think we need more maids. Perhaps start recruiting the fairies once again."

Flandre grimaced. "Those fairies are no fun anymore. I don't want any of em." She wrapped an arm around Juri's waist. "I have the best maid right here anyway!" Juri smiled and patted the vampire girls head.

"Feh," Remilia sipped her tea and frowned again. "Well, I need some servants of my own. I'm willing to share the mansion, but I refuse to share a maid."

"But fairies are useless, sis." Flandre pointed out. "Even the smart ones don't care about serving anyone other than themselves."

Remilia sighed. "True." Then she smiled. "So give me that one." She pointed at Flopsy, who jumped and squeaked again.

Flandre pouted. "The rabbit? But I caught her first!"

"Huian caught her," Remilia stated. "And besides, don't you already have the best maid?"

"Hm…" Flandre closed her eyes and frowned deeply, before looking at Remilia again. "Fine. But you can't break her permanently. If you can't train her I want her back. And Juri's head mead no matter what!"

"A fair deal, sister." Remilia smiled broadly. She drained her cup, choking a bit on the dregs before turning to the little rabbit girl. "Alright then little girl. We're going to teach you how to make tea properly from the very beginning. Screw this up and I'll have your ears again."

The moon rabbit looked like she was about to faint, but she managed something like a bow. "Y-y-y-yes lady Remilia."

Remilai chuckled. This would prove to be amusing. "Right. Follow me, quickly now. If I get hungry again before you cook me a real meal I'll have to settle for something else."

"Yes mistress!" Flopsy replied as she almost ran towards the kitchen.

Remilia finished the last page of the manga novel and set it aside with a sigh. It had been one of Koakuma's collection, a ridiculous harem comedy of little merit. Normally she'd have dismissed the entire concept as beneath her, but to be honest the story wasn't utterly terrible. She'd found herself drawn more and more to different things these days. Besides she wanted something to distract her from how poorly Flopsy was doing in the kitchen, despite her guidance.

She stood and began walking towards the shelf to grab the next volume. Ever since her waking she'd found herself lingering more and more in the library. Flandre preferred the halls quiet and still, with only Juri at her side. Remilia had always enjoyed the bustle of a full mansion, and the library had become the closest thing to that.

Voile was still quieter then her mansion had ever been, but Patchouli and her family lent it a feeling of presence. And the occasional visits of that Renko girl really brought the place to life. She could almost forgive Koakuma for stealing away her best friend.

"Oi, Remi. Didn't think you'd be looking at these books," came a familiar voice from her left.

Remilia turned to face Marisa. The magician girl still had her carefree air about her, though her smile was less mocking then it had been back when she was an intruder instead of a resident of the mansion. Of all the three Marisa had changed the least outwardly. It both annoyed and amused Remilia, which was also par for the course with Marisa.

"I wanted to see if they'd improved in the three hundred years since I went into torpor. They didn't, but I find myself very bored these days." Remilia replied. "I'm surprised you aren't bored out of your mind as well, since the world seems to treat your little thefts much more harshly than they did back when we first met."

"Yeah, people are so touchy these days," Marisa replied cheerily. "Still I've gotta lot more land to roam around now. And a buncha new targets that deserve what they get. You should go out and have some fun too Remi. It's a whole new world for mankind, witches, and underage vampires."

"Hm…" Remilia felt a strange tug inside at those words. She felt her eyes warm as she called on her oldest power. "Speak ye of beginnings, youngest of the Norns? Whose fate doth lie on the path ye see?"

Marisa's golden eyes sharpened until they almost reflected the light, while her visage darkened. "You know I hate it when you call me that Remilia. And that's your power. Not mine."

"You called upon that aspect Marisa," Remilia pointed out softly. "It's not my fault you three trigger my ability now."

"Doesn't mean you have to bring it up all the time," Marisa retorted. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and sighed. "Anyway, you know no one can see your fate except Flandre, so that should answer your question. You want more, you'll have to go bounce your power off Alice. I've done my part, which means I don't have to play puppet anymore."

Remilia shrugged as she put the book away. "You're too much of a do gooder to not give me hints like that anyway, Marisa." She smiled. "Still I owe you some thanks. Remind me to tell you where I hid some old items in the outside world. It should be little trouble for you to acquire those treasures with your current skills."

Marisa's face lit up at that. "Hm? Must be some interesting things if you didn't bring them with you. I'll hold you to that." The black white witch waved as she headed out. "Anyway I gotta look into something for a friend so I'm out. Try not to kill too many people, Remi."

Remilia waved the comment away. "Of course, of course." She turned and headed deeper into the library. It was time to talk to Alice.

She found Alice in one of the studies that had popped up in the ever expanding library. As usual, she was stitching together another set of dolls. The puppeteer gave her a polite nod before returning to her needlework.

Remilia had always looked favorably on Alice. While she'd questioned Patchouli's other suitors, Alice had seemed like a perfect choice. Not only was Alice's handiwork impressive to Remilia's refined tastes, the woman's skill in her chosen field was something that Remilia admired. For a human to surpass a vampire in anything deserved respect and Alice's masterful dexterity was something that even Remilia looked on with wonder. Remilia had even decided to learn something of the art of puppeteering herself in her free time, though she was only a dabbler.

In addition the woman had a pleasant temperament. While someone close like Marisa or Patchouli (or much as she hated to admit it, Koakuma) could rile her up and cause her passions to hail down on those unfortunate enough to be around her, normally the woman was polite and refined. Thus, they got along swimmingly. And while both of them had issues with people who were stronger than them, neither of them really felt a need to clash. Remilia was well aware Alice was manipulating the mansion politically, and she was perfectly happy to let the girl do so, so long as Alice acted behind the scenes. That was one of the reasons she felt safe leaving things to Flandre.

She sat down on one of the soft couches and watched Alice work until the magician reached a stopping point. "That's a very nice doll. It looks like you might be able to animate it fully. I heard that you'd stopped doing that though."

Alice nodded again. "Yes. After Shanghai and Hourai left the nest again I decided I wanted to focus on my biological children for a while. When they finally decide to set up their own families I'll look into making more children."

"Hmph. That may take a while with Juri," Remilia noted with a frown. She agreed with Marisa that the Juri's obsession with the head maid position and Flandre was a poor choice.

"Kirisame family curse," Alice replied with a resigned shrug. "Best not to fight it." Remilia snorted but didn't press the point. "In any case," Alice continued, "Gensoukyo wasn't really the best place for children until recently anyway. Now that things are improving maybe I'll reconsider. Still, I have time."

"True. Time is a wonderful luxury." Remilia hesitated as the memory of that last letter flashed through her mind. Shaking her head she quashed the rebellious thought. "In any case! Something is afoot." She felt her eyes heat up again. "I seek that which ye know weaver. The patterns that form and warp."

Alice raised an eyebrow, then closed her eyes. "You are the master of two things. One more then the other. When they align, you shall find your path in this world again, little dead princess."

Remilia chewed her lip at the magician's words trying to figure out the meaning behind them. The first was obviously fate. The second…? "That rabbit Flopsy? How could that stupid rabbit teach me anything?"

Alice shrugged and picked up her needle and thread again. "Sorry. This is your power, not mine. I hope you figure it out though. I've overheard your sister thinking up ideas to break you out of your introspection."

Remilia winced at that. Flandre's help usually ended in missing limbs. "Thank you for the warning." She stood and curtsied. "And for the advice. Though I do wonder why you take this matter much better than Marisa and Patchy do?"

Alice smiled and looked up from her needlework. "Sometimes it's fun to pretend not to be Alice."

Remilia curtsied again and left. She knew what it meant to be someone beyond yourself. It would be nice to have a break.

She wandered towards the heart of the library. Patchy would understand her.

Remilia had nearly slumped all the way out of her chair. Patchouli was her oldest and closest friend now, but the magician girl was her own woman, as always. Never one to leave an experiment, she hadn't even given Remilia a nod of recognition when she'd entered. The only sign that Patchouli had noticed Remilia's presence at all was that she started summoning Koakuma to do the parts of the experiment that required leaving the small work area.

It was comfortably familiar, yet boring. She had half a mind to just bust up whatever Patchy was doing. Unfortunately she needed Patchouli in an understanding mood.

Finally Patchouli stoppered the beaker she was working with, coughed a bit, then looked over at her. "How nice to see you Remi. Did you want to talk about something in particular, or just chat?"

"Yes" Remilia replied shortly. She forced herself to sit upright in her chair. "I came to ask you about an ending, and then annoy you for three times as long as you left me waiting."

"Very well. I can accept that." Patchouli sat down in the chair across from her. "So what ending."

Remilia's eyes burned again. "I seek an ending to the current tale of myself and my servant. Tell me where the thread ends, eldest of the Norns."

"The thread ends in blood, as it always does for you vampire." Patchouli said shortly. "It is your choice whose blood it shall be."

Remilia slumped again. "Damn. This is useless!" She sighed. "I should have known better than to try using my power on myself."

Patchouli blinked. "Do you even know what you're trying to do? Or why Flopsy matters?"

"That was the point of me asking," Remilia whined. "I don't even know anything about the girl other then she was sent here as the worst messenger ever."

"I see." Patchouli picked up a book from a stack next to her and began pretending to read. Remilia sat up. This was when Patchy did her best thinking. "Remi… this really isn't about Flopsy, is it?"

Remilia closed her eyes slowly. She didn't want to say it aloud, but since it was Patchouli… "No."

Patchouli's eyes floated up over the spine of the book. "Remi… you can't change the past. They're gone. You have to rebuild your life without them."

"Rebuild my life?" Remilia opened her eyes and stared up at the ceiling. "I don't know if I have a life to rebuild."

Patchouli lowered her book. "Remi…"

Remilia's gaze fell to the polished floors. "I won, you know. I broke the chains of fate. The chains only Flandre could see. The ones that broke her mind in the end. We were all supposed to die. It was fate." Patchouli nodded quietly. Remilia had never told her best friend straight out the truth that had helped drive Flandre mad, but everyone had guessed it eventually.

Her eyes closed again and she slumped back. "And now I don't know what to do. What path does the All Father have with Loki redeemed and sitting atop Asgard? What truth is there in a world without Ragnarok? Where do I go when the sagas are cut off, when what I had driving me is gone?" She looked straight at Patchouli. "You're the only one left Patchy. And even you have changed. But I'm still the same girl I was before."

They sat there in silence for a while. Remilia felt the gloom between them slowly churn and thicken.

Finally Patchouli hid behind her book again. "Do you have to be the same girl?"

Remilia stood. It seemed there were no answers here either. "I don't know what else to be." She turned to walk away.

"Remi." She stopped. "I don't know what to say about this," Patchouli replied slowly. "But I do have one piece of advice. Talk to that rabbit girl. You're training her all wrong currently."

Remilia shifted her wings and took to the air. "I'll think about it."

"What is this nonsense?! These are worse then you made before!"

Remilia looked down at the confections with disgust. The ratio of jam to blood was all wrong. Even Flandre would find the pastries too bloody. What's worse was that the bread had been made perfectly. The stupid rabbit obviously knew how to cook. She just was messing up on the details.

Even Flopsy's cowering didn't improve her mood, which only angered her further. If she couldn't enjoy bullying lesser youkai what was the point of being awake?!

"I- I'm sorry," Flopsy was out and out shaking now. Tears were starting to form in the rabbit girl's eyes.

Remilia couldn't stand it. This wouldn't be fun even if she was in a good mood. "Oh be quiet." She hopped on one of the stools and sat down. "Pull yourself together and make me some tea. You've at least become passable at that. Nothing like Sakuya, but it's drinkable."

"Y-y-y-y-yes, mistress." Flopsy staggered over to the stove and started shakily reaching for the pot.

Remilia shook her head and groaned. "Never mind, you idiot. You'll only burn yourself like that." She hopped off the stool and started towards the liquor cabinet. She needed something stronger then tea. "I don't understand you. If you're that afraid of us killing you why don't you just run away? I sure that so called prince-"

Remilia froze when she saw Flopsy had fell to the floor. The little rabbit girl was clutching her legs to her chest rocking back and forth while tears streamed down her eyes. Her mouth moved but only tiny whimpers escaped. Mismatched ears twisted and turned on her head, listening for sounds only she could hear.

As Remilia stepped forward the girl froze, eyes looking down at the floor, like a condemned man refusing to face his executioner. Remilia

shuddered at the sight. She saw it again. The broken room. The puddles and streams of blood. That one's silver hair, and the light reflecting off tears of rage, helplessness, and betrayal.

The vision passed, and Remilia found herself in the kitchen again. Flopsy's tears had stopped. Perhaps because she was too frightened to cry, perhaps because there were no more tears to be shed. "I see." Remilia blinked as tears started to form in her own eyes. Now she knew where her anger had come from.

Remilia slowly and carefully moved over to Flopsy. The rabbit girl flinched away as Remilia reached over to lift up her chin, but she was too exhausted to resist.

Remilia wished she could do this properly. To say the words that this girl needed to hear. Ask the questions properly so she could understand what was eating away at Flopsy's mind. But she couldn't. A devil could manage sympathy, but understanding… Understanding weakness was not something a vampire did. So she called upon her eyes again to hypnotize the girl.

It was surprisingly painful. Her own scarlet eyes were opposed by the lunar rabbit's crimson eyes. Reisen's eyes were much stronger, but Remilia still found herself with a headache by the time Flopsy's arms finally relaxed and ears stopped twitching.

When Flopsy had the presence of mind to look away from her in embarrassment, Remilia stepped back. She did her best to control her voice as much as possible, keeping it even. "Tell me about it."

Flopsy sniffed and clutched her legs again. Remilia was afraid for a second the girl had relapsed when she muttered. "I don't want to die."

Remilia looked down at the moon rabbit with pity. "Then why not run away? You know we won't chase you. You should know Huian at least would help you escape."

"Where?" Flopsy sobbed. "Where can I run?"

"My parents ran. They didn't want to kill people, so they ran. And, and, and the other rabbits turned them in! They were executed for not following orders." Remilia could only watch helplessly as Flopsy sniffed and panted for breath. "Why? They didn't warn the humans? They didn't try to stop the other messengers. They just didn't want to kill people! Why did they have to die for that?"

"Why?" Flopsy wailed. "And it didn't change anything! They tried to do what was right, and they got killed and no one cares! No one changed their mind, or learned to stand up for themselves or anything! The other rabbits just turned away and went back to following their masters!"

"And here I am, stuck on earth slowly losing my purity and dying because my parents were too pure to kill billions." Flopsy sniffed and wiped her eyes. "So I don't care anymore. I don't care about justice, or truth, or self-respect. I just don't want to die. That's all. That's all I want."

Remilia stood there awkwardly. What was she supposed to do? Her instincts told her to drain the little girl dry right here. To take away the pain and make a useful servant out of the rabbit, but she smothered those. Her heart told her to pet the girl and promise that everything would be okay, but that was a lie. She was a devil, and there was no way she could keep from terrifying someone as broken as Flopsy was.

With Sakuya there had been hate. A rage against the injustice of the universe and the people that named her a monster no matter what she did. Here there was nothing but fear. Flopsy knew she was powerless, both against the whims of fate and those around her.

Nothing but fear… The whims of fate…

An idea came to Remilia. A very dangerous idea, but one that fit her nature perfectly.

She felt her eyes begin to glow again, and she smiled even though her headache increased. "Very well then. We'll get back to your training later. For now take a rest. We'll meet again at midnight to talk."

Flopsy just looked up at her in confusion. Remilia sighed, then reached out with her magic and poked at a familiar mind. Dinah appeared in the room a moment later, the half devil reacting to Remilia's mini summoning. "Yes, Lady Remilia?"

"Flopsy's had a long day," Remilia said. "Could you or Huian tend to her for a bit?"

Dinah blinked at the request, but nodded. "Sure. I don't have any experiments right now so I can handle it." She walked over and lifted the little rabbit girl into her arms. "Come on. I'll teleport you to your room, so you can tell me all about it there, okay?"

Remilia sighed in relief as Dinah teleported out. The only redeeming quality of succubi was their ability to give people the companionship they required. As a half succubi, Dinah was by far the most empathetic of the SDM, meaning Flopsy was in good hands. Now Remilia could relax.

She turned back to the liquor cabinet and grabbed one of the bottles without blood in it. She didn't need to eat that badly, but hopefully alcohol could cure her headache so she could nap before the night's festivities.

Remilia flapped her wings in the moonlight. It was a wonderful night to be out and flying. The moon was nearly full, the wind was pleasantly chill, and the rustling of the leaves made the whole world seem alive, even as it was dying. Even the weight in her arms couldn't take away from her enjoyment.

"Um, mistress, I can fly on my own if it pleases you," Flopsy said. The bunny girl wriggled a little in Remilia's grip, but Remilia ignored

that.

"You don't move fast enough to keep up with me," Remilia replied simply. "I wish to handle this quickly."

"Yes mistress…" Remilia could see that Flopsy desperately wanted to know what was going on, but was too scared to ask. Well soon, Remilia would fix that.

As she cleared the next hill the target of her hunt came into view. Six figures on an overgrown trail. "Excellent." Remilia murmured. She dropped down to near the ground so they wouldn't see her arrival, then landed about a thousand feet ahead of them, near a bend in the road. She let Flopsy go, then moved to the treeline.

"What are we doing, Lady Remilia?" Flopsy whispered.

Remilia pulled the rabbit girl into the darkness of the forest before answering. "These six here are bandits. Survivors of the war who heard about a land of rich fields and beautiful women surrounded by monsters. They're here to try to demand some protection money. And probably a bit more."

Flopsy blinked. "And…?"

Remilia smirked. "I am here to hunt. You are here to watch."

Remilia saw a flash of metal as the six rounded the bend. The time for waiting was over. She grabbed Flopsy by the wrist and dragged the young girl to the center of the road.

The six men of course stopped dead in their tracks. Two of them leveled rifles at her, while the rest fumbled with their weapons. Flopsy of course shrieked and dropped to the ground. "Who are you?" One of the men shouted.

"I am the Scarlet Devil." She replied cheerily. "And I've decided this road is mine. You'll have to pay the toll if you want to cross."

"Where's your parents, little girls?" one of the fools in the back laughed.

"Dead." Remilia replied sweetly as she stretched her wings out in the moonlight. "I murdered them about a thousand years ago."

"She's one of those monsters!" The man in front yelled. "Grenade!"

Remilia snickered as the fool next to the leader shakily pulled out a grenade, twisted the cap and threw it at her. She easily dashed forward and slapped the missile up into the sky. "Too easy."

"Shit!" The men all ducked as the bomb exploded in the air. The wind rushed around her as she hopped forward amongst them. Tensing her hand just like Meiling taught her, she aimed a palm trust at the closest victim. She smiled as her hand plunged into his soft belly. With a whirl she brought her other hand around, slamming her hammer fist into his ribs. There was a crack, as if she'd struck a rotting branch, and the man went flying into a tree, leaving his warm steaming entrails behind.

With a laugh she turned and tossed the stinking, greasy handful into the arms of one of the man's friends. The bandit froze in horror, giving her plenty of time to reach up, grab his throat, and rip off his head. Sweet blood splashed on her face, causing her heart to beat even faster.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw the leader move towards Flopsy's form. Perhaps to grab a hostage. Remilia hefted the skull she'd just acquired like a ball then threw it at her new target. The grisly missile struck the man in the back with another satisfying crunch, and he collapsed like a wet rag.

Suddenly pain seared through her body in a lightning flash. Looking down, she saw one of those thrice damned swords the Japanese loved so. This one had been awakened, giving it the power to injure creatures such as herself.

But it was no more than a paper cut was to a human. She reached around and ripped the blade out, then turned. The swordsman staggered back, and Remilia's nose stung with the acrid scent of his fear. She tossed the sword through his foot, then stretched both arms as far back as they could go before letting loose with a flurry of blows that left her arms stinging. The swordsman's upper body disappeared into a fine mist.

The other two bandits dropped their weapons and ran. Remilia considered them for a moment, then drew some blood off her face and flicked the droplets at them. At the touch of her power the droplets formed into spears that raced across the path, cutting the two down.

The wind gusted, sending a rustling hail of leaves over the path. Remilia nodded in satisfaction at her work, then turned and walked to where Flopsy was staring at her in shock. "Do you understand now? The power that a devil has at their command?"

She stood before the trembling rabbit girl, covered with blood and gore. "This is the world we live in. A hell of death and bloodshed. Each day we kill others to live on. God demands we follow justice and honor, then turns his back on those that do, while the corrupt rise to the top."

Once again she reached out to lift Flopsy's eyes to her face. "But we devils offer what the divine will not. We can rip apart the fabric of this tainted world and reform it to our whims. And we give our power to those who are willing to give us what we desire."

"So tell me little rabbit. What is your wish? What do you want most of all?"

Flopsy sank to her knees. "I want-" She closed her eyes tightly. "I want to live! I just want to live! I'll do anything you ask if you keep me alive!"

Remilia nodded. She reached into her mind and called up the power, shaping words and lines into her mind as Patchouli had taught her how long ago to speed up the ritual. As the spell began to form she carefully patted back the young girls hair. "Is that your wish? Will you sacrifice your soul to the devil for it? Are you willing to cast aside the purity of the moon and embrace the taint of the earth to get it? To become a monster for all time? This is your choice. I shall not penalize you either way."

Flopsy sniffed, then looked up at Remilia with the closest thing to determination that the vampire had seen on her face. "If you protect me I promise to serve you with all that I have. Even if it costs me my soul. Even if I become a monster."

Remilia closed her eyes as memories flooded in again. Silver hair, blue eyes. And a simple reply, "I offer you my body. But my soul is my own. I will become a human in death at least." Remilia smiled sadly.

"You two really are nothing alike, are you?"

"Mistress?"

Remilia turned her thoughts back to the present. With the swipe of a claw she opened up a cut on her hand, then held it over the rabbit's mouth. "Drink this, in service to me." Flopsy shuddered, but obediently caught the few drops that fell.

The young girl cried out and convulsed, but Remilia knew the spell had worked correctly. "That's my blood binding with yours. So long as I live you will share my regenerative powers. In return you must do everything I demand of you, or your very blood will turn against you."

Remilia embraced her new servant. "Your first command, above all others, is to serve me as best you see fit, even if it means disobeying my other commands."

Flopsy blinked then rose and curtsied. "As you wish, my mistress."

"Good." Remilia smiled. She felt more alive than she had since that fateful day long ago, when she'd lost Sakuya.

She straightened up. It was time to get to work building her new life. "Now Flopsy, I'm going to teach you how to clean a carcass."

"Um, won't I need a knife for that Mistress?"

"You don't have a knife on you? What were you thinking? A proper servant should have a knife on them at all times!"

"Ah, I'm sorry mistress!"

Remilia sipped the tea as Flopsy stood next to her. "Hm… Acceptable. It seems to have a certain sharpness I'm not used to."

Flopsy bowed. "Should I change the recipe again milady?"

"Hm…" Remilia considered the matter. "No, this is fine. Though I think I would not want this more than once or twice a week."

Across from her Flandre frowned. "Really sis? It's not bad, but this isn't anything like what Sakuya would ever make."

Remilia closed her eyes. "Exactly."

Sakuya. Dear, irreplaceable, Sakuya. The perfect maid. Her perfect maid. Remilia understood now. She would never find that perfection again.

But she could build a new perfection. So long as she was willing to break with her past and forge ahead.

She opened her eyes again. "I'm letting that stupid ghost borrow Sakuya for a bit, after all. So I need a maid of my own for the next four hundred years or so until I can get her back." She smirked.

"Along with Meiling and that naive little gardener. After all, that ghost girl owes me."

She saw Flopsy's eyes darken a bit at that and she smiled wider. The little rabbit was getting jealous already was she? Well the girl had sold her soul to serve as Remilia's personal maid. Talking about other servants around her would annoy her.

She looked back at Flandre. "I think Flopsy here will need some leadership training for then. Why not take in a few fairy maids. Just two or three will do."

"Hm… Wouldn't other rabbits be better?" Flandre smiled at Flopsy. "You can call in some if you want right?"

"Um, I would prefer to remain the only rabbit here, Lady Flandre," Flopsy replied.

Juri nodded. "Fairies would be better for me as well, mistress. I know several charms to handle them. Devils would be best but…"

"No way." Remilia and Flandre replied in unison. The sisters exchanged a nod. Three devils under one roof was enough.

Flandre sighed. "Alright. Three fairies. And Juri has to approve all of them. And if they annoy me I make them go kyuu~!" Flandre said, squeezing her hand and making a tree pop behind Remilia.

Flopsy shivered at that, but Remilia was happy to note the little rabbit recovered almost instantly. "Good. Flopsy, make three rooms for our new servants."

The bunny girl bowed. "Yes Lady Remilia."

"Ah, and take this." Remilia reached into her pockets and handed the bemused rabbit girl a silver pocketwatch. "A badge of your office."

"Thank you, mistress!" Flopsy smiled and bowed again before bounding away.

When Flopsy was gone, Juri cleared her throat. "She seems a strange choice for that gift Lady Remilia. While the idea of a white rabbit with a pocketwatch bounding around my mother amuses me, she's hardly a spiritual successor for Miss Sakuya."

Remilia sipped her tea again happily. "You're right. She's utterly unlike Sakuya. Except for the most important point." She looked up at Juri. "She's mine."

Juri smiled at the reply. "Ah. A perfect answer. As expected from Lady Flandre's sister."

Flandre shrugged. "I don't get it sis. But whatever makes you happy."

"Indeed." Remilia looked out into the garden, unburdened by times weight. Once again the eternal child, looking for her place in the world. "Whatever makes me happy."

Chapter 3

The whispers came from far away. The cries of a people in anguish. "Oh great one, save us! Spare us from the death of fire. Save us from the horrors of the sky and earth." And the raven heard their pleas.

She arose from her nest beneath the earth and stretched out her wings. With a single beat she arose from her hell, with another she flew away from her home, and with a third she reached the world.

Before her stood the ruins of a great nation, a nation the power of the sun had built and destroyed. Its cities had once reached to the sky, but now they were simply rubble across the earth, like all the works of man. She sensed youkai and demons wandering the broken streets, and sneaking through the regrowing jungles.

Beneath her wings people stood atop the crumbling ruins of pyramids and offered their faith up to her. They asked her to protect them from the demons, to spare them from her wrath. But they called her by the name of another.

She shook the doubt from her feathers. She was not one to worry about names. They had faith, and faith was what she ate. A raven did not refuse food. She reached down to take the streams of power into herself.

"Stop black bird of the east. This offering is not for you."

The raven turned to see a man in bright clothes, decorated with feathers. A black mirror sat upon his chest, and to her surprise his right foot was merely bones. She could tell he was an old god, if weak. Still he had challenged her right to feed. "The people below call for the sun, for the god of flame who took away the old world. That is me. Who are you to claim these offerings?"

"I am Tezcatlipoca. I am the Smoking Mirror. I am the one who is master of all humans. They call upon my name," the god proclaimed boldly.

The raven cocked her head. That was the name the people called upon. But they called upon her aspect. Still it was strange. If it was his name they called, then he should have taken the aspect for his own in this land. Cautiously she walked around the god, looking at his true self.

Finally she reached a conclusion. "You are a dead god. They abandoned you. You are trying to revive with their prayers."

"They did not abandon me!" The god swung his fist, and the winds roared. The raven twisted in the air to keep aflight. "They were stolen from me! And now that the tongueless god can not protect them, I shall return! So be gone from this place, eater of carrion."

The raven preened at her feathers and thought some more. The ways of the gods were strange to her, and there were many possibilities to consider. Her head filled with scenarios and worries.

But in the end, she was a raven. And the god was weak.

"They call upon my aspects. They worship my attributes. They speak of my actions." The raven's eyes began to glow, and the flames of the sun fell upon her like a mantle. "If they call your name, then I shall consume you and take your name for my own."

"You will eat me? I am Tezcatlipoca! I shall consume you, and take your faith to aid my rebirth," the god roared.

The god's body twisted and shifted as he transformed into a great jaguar large enough to slap the sun from the heavens. The sleek feline pounced upon the raven, but she was quick and wise to the ways of cats. She flew forward under the jaguar's body and pulled at his tail as she passed.

The jaguar god spun around as only a cat could do and tried to crush her beneath its claws. Her wings beat and she flew into the sky above the stars. She hovered just out of range as the god leaped up at her and laughed cruelly at her foe's attacks.

Tezcatlipoca roared his rage and the winds came at his commands. The air itself turned into razor sharp talons that ripped through the air. Even with her agility, there would be no escaping the attack.

She closed her eyes and reached inside herself. To the core of her being where molten fire curled and roiled. Her mind removed the barriers keeping her powers in check, and the gem on her chest flared as the power of nuclear fusion roared to life.

The blades of wind bent and warped as the sun within her heart pulled the air itself to its core. Her body was lacerated. Her blood soaked her clothes. But the plasma in her soul slowly expanded as the winds fed her true essence.

Howling, the jaguar flung a hurricane into the sky, then another. The raven's skin was flayed again and again, and her blood began to glow, then ignite as the power in her body grew and grew.

With a raucous cry of victory she flung her wings open, and disturbed the massive magnetic fields that were constraining her godly essence. A flare of power tore free from her body and slammed into the jaguar god. Tezcatlipoca was slammed through the ground, into the darkness of hell.

The raven glided down after her prey. First through dark caverns of earth, then of shattered bone, then of screaming fire. But she knew the ways of hell, and the hells recognized her. There was nothing that stood in her way.

Finally she reached a cavern of smoke where the fumes billowed and swayed like curtains in the wind. It reminded her of the caverns back home, the ones that led to the mystical surface world that she so rarely saw, even as a god. Here she had found her best friend

hidden in the smoke and fog, lying so close yet so far to the corpse she needed to eat to survive. Was that a corpse in the mist? The raven's mind swirled and spun in the smoke and fog, the corpse before her giving a rigid grin as she fluttered over it.

Why was she here?

She did her best to remember the past moments, to think through the haze. Did she need to eat someone?

"You came here to eat someone, but you could not," the corpse replied.

That did not seem right to her. "I can eat anything now. I am the sun," she replied.

The corpse lay before her and said, "You are the sun of your realm, but you are not the black sun of this realm. The black sun of this realm lost his foot and rebuilt it with bones."

She cocked her head to consider this. "I lost my foot to the fires humans unleashed. And I rebuilt it with their bones."

"The stars are at the sun's mercy," the corpse protested.

She held out her cape. "The stars are my raiment."

"The sun died and was replaced by other suns, but now rises again in new form," the corpse said softly.

"I have died and been reborn, both as myself and as a god," she replied confidently. "I am the returned sun."

"Then you have already eaten Tezcatlipoca," the corpse said mournfully. "Go little raven. There is nothing for you here."

The raven nodded. "That is right. I am Tezcatlipoca. I am the Yatagarasu. I am Utsuho Reiuji."

And with that she absently ate the dying god's heart.

Orin shifted uncomfortably in her sleep. The furnace of the underground was ebbing, but her body was hot. Her dreams flickered and shifted, the strange fever twisting about in her mind. Jaguars and serpents rose from the flames, chasing hummingbirds and butterflies before returning to the flames again. Suns rose and were extinguished. Temples were built and were crushed. The scent of blood wafted across her nose, and was pushed aside by screams and fire. And in the background the horrific clouds that had soared over the land during the night of destruction slowly gathered in their malignant beauty.

"Orin."

The kassha's eyes opened, but she knew she did not wake. Sleep and waking had no meaning to a youkai in this state. She was not in her room. Time and space were an illusion that had no use right now. She was inside her true self, a broken and cracked cavern filled with corpses and ghosts, the only light the glow of magma from below. Right now the magma was pulsing, roiling, while the ghosts seemed to hum with power. And in the darkness beyond she began to see different shapes shifting and moving.

Utsuho stood before her. Her best friend. Her goddess. A three legged crow with eyes burning like lava. A striking black winged humanoid with an intricately etched arm cannon and the finest machined clothing. A whirlwind of fire and death with a smoky mirror at its center. The black sun of hell. All of those stood before her, the goddess unbound by form in this realm.

Orin squinted as Utsuho held out a hand. "Come Orin. We must speak with our supplicants. There is much to teach them."

As Orin reached up pain flashed through her body. Her skin seemed to peel away from her body as it expanded, her inner flesh slower to fit her new form. She could feel it now. The warping and shifting

forces of chaos that were altering her very nature as a youkai. She knew if she followed Okuu her very existence as a youkai might change.

She held her breath and took her goddess' hand. The pain was less sharp this time. "Goddess, I fear you must speak, for I do not know the words these people will hear," she said as they started heading back to the human world.

"Trust in my divine power, for I have seen their hearts and know their ways," Utsuho replied. "You need but act on my will."

Kanako shivered as she looked at herself in the mirror. It had been centuries since she'd prepared to do something like she had today. And she had never gone through with it.

To absorb a god was not something to do lightly.

"Are you still hanging around?" Suwako asked as the frog goddess entered the room. "That raven has already finished her part and then some. If you don't get a move on you're going to be late."

Kanako whirled on the smaller goddess. "Well, forgive me if I'm not as quick to throw away my sense of self." She frowned and looked back at the history books she'd been reading ever since she'd felt the disturbance. "These gods are old and powerful. Far greater than we ever were. Even with their faith destroyed and scattered to the wind they still had the force of legend behind them."

Which meant if she consumed one, their legend would be as strong as her own. And legends were the essence of gods.

"You always were squeamish about this kinda thing weren't you," Suwako said. The little goddess then smiled. "Not that I should complain too much. After all if you weren't such a scaredy cat you might have eaten me." The little blond goddess laughed at Kanako's growl.

"Hopefully it won't come to that," Kanako muttered.

Suwako shook her head. "It will. But it'll be fine Kanako." The little goddess smiled. "It doesn't matter what the humans say, in the end, your true form is the goddess of change. Always moving towards the future. You'll end up in charge no matter what."

Kanako blinked at her fellow goddess' encouragement then smiled. "Thank you."

With that she took a deep breath and summoned the winds to her. Her mind split and she entered the realm of the gods as a great white snake. With a flick of her tail her form soared through the skies towards the lands east of the easternmost islands. She was an ancient goddess, and she had learned much about the world before retreating to Gensoukyo. Unlike the raven it was easy for her to find the person she was seeking.

As she flew into the other god's realm the spirit whirled to face her. "Who are you who comes to the lands of Quetzalcoatl? Tell me your name intruder! And tell me why do you have the smell of the one who has taken the place of my enemy, the one who slew my brother?" The god stood before her, proud and tall in his warrior's regalia. As he spoke his wings rippled with the colors of the rainbow. This god was weak, but not dead.

Kanako stopped before the god and respectfully bowed, never letting her eyes off the warrior's face. "I am Kanako Yasaka. I am the god of Suwa. I am the patron of the new empire of the rising sun. The one who took Tezcatlipoca's name and place is of my pantheon and my making. I come to stand in balance to her in this world." She drew her sword, but did not raise it. "I come to take your place oh great feathered serpent."

Quetzalcoatl raised his blade, but as she had so many years before she lifted her free hand and called upon her divine powers. There was a piercing shriek and a wave of sound washed over the winged

serpent's obsidian sword, shattering the blade. Quetzalcoatl cursed and stepped back, staggered by Kanako's display of godly might.

"As you can see my powers as a god are greater," Kanako stated. "I offer you a bargain. Surrender and I shall let you aid me as a subordinate god. With your aid I shall lead your people to a even greater future."

The native god looked at his shattered sword, then tossed it aside. "I refuse." He looked Kanako in the eyes, and this time she was forced to take a step back. "I can see now to fight is futile. You are a very strong god now. But a strong god is not enough!"

The sky turned dark as the god continued speaking. "These people do not need just a god. They need Quetzalcoatl! They need the winged serpent! They need the god who has stood over these lands since humans first walked upon it."

"And Quetzalcoatl is a god of sacrifice!" the native god's voice boomed like thunder through the heavens. "I will not give up my place to a foreigner. I will not give up my people to strange new gods. Only Quetzalcoatl will rule." The winged serpent called forth another weapon to his hand. "If you wish to be that god, you shall have to sacrifice yourself and absorb my person."

Kanako blinked, then bowed again. "I apologize. You are right. Quetzalcoatl is the god of this land." She took a breath to steady herself, then opened her soul up. Her clothing shifted and warped to the warrior's dress of this country, and her sword changed from her old Japanese blade to a shining maquahuitl. "And I shall be Quetzalcoatl, even if it costs me myself!"

To offer anything less would be unworthy of a ruler.

The two eyed each other with respect, then ran forward to clash in battle.

Sylvia shivered as the extravagantly dressed priests began their ritual.

To say she had misgivings about the ceremony was a grave understatement. The ritual was horrid, barbaric and cruel. Her heart twisted within her every time the priests kicked the sacrifice to force the man to run further.

But it was the only way.

When the apocalypse had come their city had been spared by chance. It had been right at the outskirts of Mexico City proper, and the deadly neutron rays that had wiped all life from the city hadn't quite reached. It had been a terrible and agonizing day which had turned everyone's lives upside down, but they had been lucky. There was food and water in storage in the towns warehouses. Enough for everyone and all the refugees that had arrived. So while they lacked electricity and gas, they had what they needed to begin the slow transferal back to a farming lifestyle. Many people lit candles for that small miracle.

The first three years had been mostly shock. Everyone was just trying to survive. Without the communications they had all taken for granted, the world was both larger and smaller then it had ever been before, and it took time to cope. The struggle had forced their community together and no one had dared to start a big fight. There had been arguments and crimes of course, but a makeshift police service had helped keep the problems to a minimum, just as the makeshift defense force helped keep the mutants and creatures of the night away.

This year however the troubles began. One moonless night, a great howl and cry had erupted from the north. A noise so terrifying that the guards had turned on the generators to shine lights out from the city. Lights that revealed a jungle, fresh and reborn from the ground, like no humans had ever lived there.

Panic spread throughout the town, but the leaders quickly quelled it. However calm and unity did not return. One of the leaders, Miguel Quezada, had proclaimed that the old gods had returned. That it was time to throw off the trappings of the Spanish invaders and reclaim the ways of the Nahua. He said only by returning to the worship of the city's god Tezcatlipoca could they stave off the monsters of the jungle.

At first people had laughed. When Miguel had shown the power to call fire from his hands the laughter faded. Father Rodriguez of course dismissed the claims as madness, and all but openly called Miguel a witch. The town became tense and conflicted. It seemed likely the two camps would erupt into open violence.

Then the jaguar demons attacked and the matter had been settled.

The guns of the people and the prayers of the holy were equally useless against the monsters. But the flames of Tezcatlipoca drove the monsters back to the jungle. His loudest critics dead, and his followers the only hope of their small city, Miguel had demanded a day of celebration and sacrifice to the gods. With the last surviving Catholic priest as the chosen sacrifice.

What could they do? She had been an atheist before, but there really wasn't a question any more. Miguel had produced results. The gods had spoken, and they had spoken with fire. No matter what she thought of the brutality.

Sylvia winced again as the victim stumbled on the last staircase. The priests of Tezcatlipoca had run the poor man ragged until he could barely stand. The man tried to push himself upright but his arms gave out again, and his body fell onto the stone pyramid's steps.

This was enough for the priests apparently. Miguel and his assistant grabbed the sacrifice by the arms and dragged him to the top, where they had set out their alter. Another priest of Tezcatlipoca carried forth a heavy stone bowl, while Miguel raised his obsidian knife. "Oh great Tezcatlipoca, he who gives us life! Lord of near and far! Enemy

of both sides! We who are all your slaves give thanks for your works and offer you this sacrifice!"

The knife descended, and Sylvia closed her eyes. She had hoped that the poor victim at least had lost the power to scream, but the man's death wail cut through the crowd's gasp. She forced herself to open her eyes as Miguel pulled out the heart and raised it up. The priest held the bloody organ for all to see, then cast it down to the waiting bowl. "For Tezcatlipoca!"

Sylvia cried out in shock as a burst of flame roared to life on the stage. The priests too screamed and fell back as a dark figure strode from the blast onto the pyramid. A hand lazily reached out and plucked the sacrificial heart from the air. "Behold my people! I am Tezcatlipoca!"

The crowd fell to their knees. Sylvia knew she should bow, but the sight was too stunning. The god before her was both everything and nothing like the tales.

The most obvious truth was the figure was a goddess. A dusky beauty beyond mortal comparison. The woman was dressed in great finery, clothing as ornate as the priests' vestments, but made of the most modern fabrics. Her right arm was covered in a power armor gauntlet that turned it into a claw, and her right leg was a cast of bone, recreated after the great monster that formed the earth had bitten it off. Smokey black wings fluttered behind her, while a cape that seemed to be formed from the night sky itself both concealed and was concealed by the black feathers. A black jaguar covered in red spots slowly prowled around the goddess' legs, and in the center of the woman's chest a obsidian mirror glowed and smoldered, as if the magma of the earth's core had slipped inside it.

Tezcatlipoca looked out over the people and raised her arms. "Oh my people! By your faith I return to you! I have heard your cries and I have answered!"

"F-f-false god! Who are you!" Sylvia gasped along with the crowd as Miguel stood and pointed a shaky hand at the goddess. "Tezcatlipoca is no woman!"

The goddess turned to face Miguel and sneered before snapping her fingers. The priest that had accompanied Miguel threw his head back and howled, then his body twisted and churned into the form of a Jaguar man. "False priest, though your words brought my return you never had faith in me, only yourself. You made a pact with the monsters to secure your power, and used witchcraft to fake my blessing. For this I give you death."

Tezcatlipoca snapped her fingers again and the black jaguar behind her pounced. Miguel managed to scream only once before the mighty cat tore out his throat. The jaguar man yelped then turned and fled before suddenly exploding in flames. The priest who had carried the stone bowl up to receive the sacrifice prostrated himself on the ground before the goddess shivering in terror.

The woman casually gnawed on the heart a bit before tossing it into the bowl and standing before the last priest. "Rise boy. I have seen your heart and fed on your faith. You stand true to me, and in time will be one of my servants here." The man slowly stood and then followed the black and red jaguar in stunned silence as the great cat led him to stand behind the goddess.

Tezcatlipoca raised her hands, and power seemed to wash over Sylvia. "Hear my words. I Tezcatlipoca shall give you power. I shall protect you from the demons, and give you strength against your enemies. So long as you praise and give sacrifice to me, your city shall be strong and unassailable!"

"You never see the long path sister." Sylvia shivered as another powerful voice boomed over the crowd. There was a rush of wind and then two goddesses stood upon the temple heights.

This goddess was white to Tezcatlipoca's black. The woman was fair skinned, and the robes she wore were something that could have

appeared in a fashion show back before the apocalypse. Based on old traditions, but still modern. The woman kept her hair short, and most tellingly her wings shimmered and gleamed with every color under the sun. Sylvia did not need an introduction to know who this goddess was. "Quetzalcoatl," Sylvia whispered, and the people nearby seemed to agree.

"Who are you to interrupt me, sister?" Tezcatlipoca said angrily. "These are my people. They gave me faith! I am the ruler of the west, just as you are ruler of the east. Keep to your own kingdom. I will give my power to these people."

Quetzalcoatl shook her head. "You have power yes, but remember it was I who gave you that power to begin with. A people with only power will never become an empire. They will crumble before others, betrayed from within like a poorly built house." She raised her hands. "I am the goddess of the east, and the east stretches forever. The poets and builders shall receive my blessing, and my people will become prosperous."

Tezcatlipoca laughed shortly. "The west stretches forever as well sister. You can talk about poets and builders, but in the end, they too crave my power. Just a more subtle form. The east has the empire of the rising sun, but this shall be my empire, and they shall guard the setting sun!" The dusky woman snapped her fingers and then turned back to the crowd. "But your words do not matter. We shall let faith decide! Give praise unto me, and you all shall have power. The power to crush your foes. The power to lift up your friends. The power of the future!"

The rainbow serpent turned to the people as well. "And if you give your faith to me you shall have the innovation and skill to not just rebuild, but to create a new world. To rise above the past to a greater future. You shall teach others the arts. You shall show others the way to live. This I offer you for your worship."

The two goddesses turned to face each other again. "Hmph. We shall speak more on this," Tezcatlipoca said. "First though we must

remind the star goddesses who rules these lands."

"Indeed," Quetzalcoatl replied. "We will set the world aright. Then we can teach the people how to praise us properly." The black jaguar leaped inside the dusky woman's form, and then the two goddesses vanished. One in smoke, the other in light.

A silence fell over the crowd, then the surviving priest of Tezcatlipoca moved over to where Miguel's corpse was. The priest lifted the body over his head, then cast it down the stairs. The shattered body bounced all the way down, leaving a trail of blood behind. "Thus is the fate of all who abuse her mighty name for their own ends!" the man cried. Those closest to the bottom of the temple, those who had accepted the miracles of Tezcatlipoca first, cheered at the pronouncement.

Sylvia though simply nodded at the poetic justice and turned away. She could not oppose those who served the smoking mirror but she had another plan.

It was time to fix up the temple to Quetzalcoatl.

The world has had six suns.

The first five suns were created by the gods. Each time a god created a sun through their own sacrifice, but each time the god's faults and failures caused that sun to fall. It was only the fifth sun, noble and brave Nanahuatzin that stood up.

But the humans of the fifth sun were not as strong. The followers of the tongueless god brought their war to the world, and when the battles ended, they tore down the temples and ceased the prayers of the people. The sun became stale and dead and the stars fell silent.

In the silence humans built their cities of steel and glass. They picked up the tools of the gods and learned secrets that once only the stars understood. In time they tossed aside even the tongueless

god in their power and reached up to touch the face of the lifeless moon.

And in their power, they turned to folly.

By their own hands they called forth the end of their world. Their weapons turned the skies black, and the lifeless sun could sustain them no more.

But from the ashes two gods awoke from their slumber. Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca. Long had they struggled against each other, often had they worked together.

Seeing there was no sun in the sky the two each considered how to bring forth a new sun. Both had tried before, and both had failed before. Finally Quetzalcoatl found a flock of crows who had eaten pieces of the old suns. He said to Tezcatlipoca "if we eat these birds we can create a new sun, but whoever does so will lose their old self and become a crow."

Tezcatlipoca replied, "What old self do I have to lose? You were remembered, but most have forgotten me." And so Tezcatlipoca ate the crows and became one of them, shedding his own self and becoming the goddess of the black sun.

Quetzalcoatl, jealous of his newly reborn sister's power shed his skin and let the human's world seep in. He transformed himself into the goddess of the ivory tower.

And so reborn they came down to the people who had once forgotten them. Our people. With their guidance and strength our empire rises. Our cities spread from California to Panama, and our ships sail to across both oceans. The spirits recognize us, and do not harm us, and in return we treat them with respect.

This is the era of the sixth sun. The second black sun. It is our golden age. May it last as long as all the eras before.

- Sylvia, High Priestess of Quetzalcoat